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## Fascination Remains Forever

Estabraq Ahmad

Panel: The Best Thing I Ever Read Was...

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## Estabraq Ahmad (Kuwait)

### Fascination Remains Forever

I feel it tickling my fingers, invading my mind, giving me the great joy of thinking and admiring these precious words, wishing them to be my own words. I have loved so many works written by many authors and they have remained deep in my mind. Each one of them made me change my thoughts about what and how I should write and helped me to know the reality of many societies, but there are few books that I re-read with admiration over and over.

One of the books I always read for the purpose of feeding my memory with its beautiful paragraphs is a collection of essays called *Less Engineering, Less Maps* by the Bahraini writer, poet, novelist, screenwriter and journalist “AMIN SALEH.” His book is a reflection on his life experiences and his wise as well as meaningful thoughts about writing and people.

#### **Amin Saleh as a rebellious, different writer:**

Saleh was born in 1950. He graduated from high school and worked in the finance department of various travel agencies. He traveled to France and tried to study at the cinema academy. He couldn't finish his studies, but that didn't stop him from loving screenwriting anyway and writing and translating many books on cinema. He isolated himself and kept working hard to test his ability to find his new language in many fields, such as cinema and TV serials, by looking at himself as a wizard who had a strong interest in writing and life and who wanted to explore many types of written texts. He was willing to consider new thoughts and develop new ideas, and as a result of that he published his first book in 1972, *Hona al warda, bona narqos* (*Here is the Rose, Here we Dance*). Later came other books such as *Farashat* (*Butterflies*) as well as short stories and novels. He wrote the first Bahraini film *The Block*, and wrote TV serials in the 1980s, but Amin Saleh is still unknown to many writers and readers, especially since he's seeking special readers (he calls them “positive” readers) to whom he will reveal his scripts. They are expected to be highly educated readers who wait for special uncommon scripts. At the same time he doesn't care about what the reader expects, because he thinks that the relation between the reader and the script depends on what script says, not what the reader wants it to say.

In addition, he avoided the media, especially interviews on TV programs, because he hated spoken questions and being observed by the camera. Once I interviewed him, and I knew that only written questions would get him to answer freely. He gave me a good interview for a shy person like him and told me that if the Bahraini authority stopped him from writing, that would be like receiving the death penalty, because writing is the best thing he can do. He also told me many things that surprised me, especially when he said that if he couldn't be a good writer, his wish would be to be a musician.

#### ***Less Engineering, Less Maps:***

*Less Engineering, Less Maps* has been important to me as a writer because of the many topics it discusses—how the personality of a writer affects the work, the problems of literary criticism, fanaticism, Saleh's friendships with other writers, the theater, and many other subjects. I'll give you a bit of a taste of the scope of the book.

In one essay he talked about what it meant for him to be close to the famous Bahraini poet Qasim Hadad. Together they wrote their very famous book *Al ganwashen*, which took a long time to finish because they worked very slowly and made a lot of changes and modifications. Yet it wasn't boring for them because they find writing to be an enjoyable, discovery-filled process, and that was what made this book a great book for both of them. In another essay, he wisely expressed his thoughts on how new ideas are always fighting the lazy, closed, fanatical mind because they threaten the peace of that mind. Yet in the end the new ideas will win. Saleh also advises creative people to not give up and to strive for their future goals. He says: "Don't care about them, those who in every corner lurk for you, those who will groom you to fit the culture. They want to domesticate you, but what will be left for you if you lose your voice?" He also wrote many stories and examples that referred to a lot of different writers, artists, filmmakers and their works, and how viewers received them. Saleh is also a member of the "Owal Theater" in Bahrain, so he talked about the theater and the high level of cultural knowledge of the audience, as well as the need to pump unusual forms and take advantage of old experiences.

Every time I read more pages from this book I feel I'm reading and learning new things. Its lessons have numerous meanings. The book is full of knowledge which has given me a good basis in my own ideas about writing and let me see Amin Saleh's ideas and principles.

But one of the most important things this book has given me is the motivation to keep writing. One example of the words that have allowed me to continue is the essay "Familiar Transformation and the Strange Reader." Let me summarize Saleh's ideas.

First there is the ordinary reader, the category that most readers fall into. These readers think that the work should be understandable and go from A to B, and that they should know what the writer is writing about. The writer should surrender to the readers and give the readers what they want, and the book should be a glass-bottomed boat from which you can see everything. These ordinary readers are unintelligent and don't have a lot of feelings—their world is a flat one with no depth. They want writing that doesn't threaten them or shake their beliefs. People used to reject this style of reading, but it has become more dominant. The problem is made worse by the gap created between creative works and readers by the political, economic, and cultural atmosphere of our time. People aren't connecting with artistic works because it's not a priority for them.

However, new and challenging ideas won't go away and still fight to exist, not just in writing, but in other artistic areas as well. And there is another type of reader willing to accept them.

The "positive" reader is responsive to new ideas, very sensitive, and challenges what he or she reads. These readers believe that they should make an attempt to understand, to discover, and to imagine. They use not just their emotions, but also their brains, and they develop responses to the work. This kind of reader may even create his or her own text in reaction to what he or she reads.

Saleh explains that when we focus on the message of a text, we pay less attention to the beautiful language. We think that what we don't understand will prey upon our values, and is an invasion against our civilization. But Saleh believes that this desire to destroy the new thing is shameful and pathetic. The more you grow to know it, the more you

realize it has value. There have been a lot of books that we didn't understand when they first were written, but as we read them we grew to accept them and they even became important.

And we can never understand a work completely—it will always have its mysteries. Saleh quotes André Malraux, who said that “the work is like a question to God about the meaning of life.” If you were able to find all the answers to the questions posed by a text, it would no longer exist. Mystery is what makes a book meaningful. Even when reading less literary works in which answers are more obvious, such as those of philosophy, economics, history, and politics, we should ask questions ourselves, interrogate the ideas, and realize that even these books don't provide *all* the answers.

This questioning can affect you and how you think about your dreams and desires. You shouldn't expect that the writer will give you a miracle, but he will move your imagination and make you care more about your dreams. He will give you a new experience, cross your soul with the seed of joy, and will enable you to connect on a deeper level with yourself, your feelings, others like you, and nature. This is the most important thing, and in fact is necessary.

Some people think that writers have the truth, that they know all the secrets of the universe and can answer all questions, but actually, the creative person just says the questions and does not answer them.

When a writer decides to write, he enters into a dialogue, through which he will try to understand the world and himself. He understands that there is a gap between his work and readers, but he does not surrender to it. He tries to get away from restrictions, and asserts his right to create. Saleh admits that few people will read what you write, see what you make, or hear what you play. You may think that the problem lies with you—your understanding, your style, your ambition, and your dreams. So you surrender and punish yourself, you feel guilty and disappointed about your inability to connect with readers, and believe that you should change your style and beg for another chance. But in truth, there are a lot of readers who understand what you are doing. Nietzsche says that the creative person tries to find friends—not buddies or believers, but companions with like-minded ideas with whom to carve new values.

The audience frightens us and makes us lazy and less talented, so we withdraw and begin to doubt our writing and ourselves. But there is a diverse audience out there, unpredictable and without shape. You can't say for sure what they think. Remember that only a few people truly knew Beethoven or Goya in their own time. Van Gogh only sold a few paintings while he was alive. Kafka only sold thirty-five copies of *The Castle* during his lifetime. We didn't find the value of these artists until after they had passed away.

These words of Saleh's have given me the courage to write what I want to write. Writers will even be attacked by other writers for attempting to try something strange or new, but real writers will always encourage new writers. This is the book that I turn to when I feel let down about the negative atmosphere of competition between writers who used to be friends and who, in their petty quarrels, have forgotten the larger responsibilities of inking the pages. This book caused me to meditate on a lot of subjects and gave me the power to be stronger in my battles to be a better writer.